

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN COME OF AGE. SOME INDIAN NOVELS OF THE PAST DECADE

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ABSTRACT

The ending of the British Raj and the emergence of an Independent India in 1947 raised some debate as to the future of the English language and the future of Indian literature written in English competing, as it would be, with so many other rich indigenous languages. Would the distinguished Indian writers writing in the 1950s and 60s be the last to do so in English? This article discusses the novels of six Indian writers born in the post-colonial decade of the 1950s whose first work appears in the 1980s: Rohinton Mistry, Boman Desai, I. Allan Sealy, Shashi Taroor, Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Seth, all of whom have contributed to the maintenance of the Indian novel in English. There are, however, aspects of Indian life which do seem better reflected in other Indian languages which call for more translation in order to reach a wider, non-Indian readership.

Around the time when the British Raj (Occupation if less high-sounding is perhaps a more exact item) was coming to an end in 1947, it would have been curious to ask in academia what the learned scholars of English literature could say about Indian literature written in English. The question would, most likely, have evoked surprise and some puzzlement. Indian literature in English? Oh yes, of course there was Tagore, a Nobel prize winner, wasn't he? Yeats took him up for a time... After that one would have to think hard before any further name came to mind. India in English terms, it was thought, had been well conveyed by Kipling and E.M.Forster. Kipling's imperialism had perhaps become a bit of a liability for the coming post-colonial world but he had recently acquired a certain new respectability under the protection of T.S.Eliot;¹ Forster, of course, was already part of The Canon. That Indians should ever write novels in English of a quality to be admitted into the Establishment of English Lit. seemed, at that time, very improbable indeed.

Yet Indian writing in English had been going on for more than a century and even if we were to limit ourselves to the novel in the years immediately prior to Independence, our scholars might have discovered that three of what were to become India's most distinguished novelists in English had published their first works in the years 1935-1938. Their penetration into the world of British publishing had not been easy. R.K.Narayan has described the odyssey of his manuscript *Swami and Friends*, rejected by many London publishers and about to be tossed into the Thames before coming to the percipient attention of Graham Greene.² Mulk Raj Anand, though better situated than Narayan, having associated with Virginia Woolf and company in London and Yeats and Lady Gregory at Coole, still suffered the indignity of having his fine first novel *Untouchable* returned by 19 publishers before appearing under the protective wing of E.M.Forster.³ India, the brightest jewel of the empire, the source of so much of Britain's wealth and prestige, was of little interest to the British reading public of the time unless filtered through the eyes of a British writer. The reluctant publishers of the thirties would have been astonished to know that more than half a century later Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and a number of R.K. Narayan's novels would still feature in the Penguin catalogue.

If such was the position of the Indian novel in English towards the end of the Raj, what would it be after 1947 when the British influence in India declined? There were those who prophesised that, under the official pressure of Hindi and the powerful presence of so many other rich, major languages with ancient literary traditions, English, always the language of a small minority, had a poor future. Those who commanded it to a standard of literary excellence would be a privileged, foreign educated elite, out of touch with both the *marga* deriving from the ancient brahminical, sanskrit traditions, and the more popular *deshi*, local and regional ones. English, a status language, imitative of the former imperial masters, would become static and unable to pick up the dynamics of daily life. Moreover, for whom would it be written? If for a foreign, English readership in Britain or the USA, would not the novel have to conform to the critical modes of those countries? And how could the intricacies of Indian life, with its caste system, its complex religious practices, its marriage, funeral and eating habits be conveyed without a wealth of notes and glossaries?

In spite of such inauspicious predictions, Indian writing in English has gone on, producing much notable literature in prose and poetry,⁴ works that have retained an essential 'indianness', a quality which sets them apart from what may be written in English elsewhere. That this should be so is not really surprising for Indians have, after all, lived since time immemorial in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual world where even within the nucleus of a single family two or more languages might well be in daily use.

Speaking to us at a meeting in London in 1982, Mulk Raj Anand explained how he had struggled to achieve the speech rhythms of his Punjabi villagers, "to mouth the grunts, growls and the hearty greetings" and "the recreation of feelings, dim glimmerings that would be somewhat alien to the average English reader."⁵ Raja Rao's often quoted foreword to his first novel *Kanthapura* (1938) described a similar difficulty in conveying the speech and customs of his South Indian rural world in English. Yet, as he said, English was not altogether an alien language for him.

It is the language of our intellectual make-up –like Sanskrit or Persian was before– but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual,

many of us writing in our own language and English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians.⁶

These three 'pioneer' novelists, Rao, Anand and Narayan, having overcome the difficulties of getting a foothold in English literature, have all continued publishing well into this post-colonial world, followed by a number of other distinguished writers born in the latter days of the Raj and appearing on the literary scene in the fifties or sixties. These were writers still bound by memories of a British occupation, of *satyagraha*, the Congress Party and Partition. They belonged to two worlds and formed a bridge between them.⁷

Although many of these writers are still producing fine work today, it is not our intention here to discuss their already well-known achievement, but rather to concentrate on a yet more recent generation, born in the fifties and raised in the new 'free' India, with all the advantages that this era might entail. These children of Midnight or The Dawn have come into their own as writers in the eighties and are offering new and interesting perspectives regarding the continuance of the Indian novel in English. They differ widely in ethnic and regional origins and have produced novels of great diversity, yet certain common features may be found. They were all born in India and educated there before going on to further studies or work in Britain, Canada or the USA, many in fields other than literature, but withal they continue to be deeply engaged with India, its history and myths and the political scene of their own times.

If English is, as we have seen, a very minority language within the vast linguistic panorama of India, we may reduce it even further by considering first two extremely small English-speaking ethnic groups that have, nevertheless played an important role over several centuries: the Parsis and the Anglo-Indians.

The word Parsi generally conjures up an image of a westernized, energetic, prosperous and philanthropic people, based in Bombay, who have produced famous lawyers and political leaders such as Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, Jamsetji Nasarwanji Tata, the founder of the great cotton mills or his son, Dorabji of the iron-ore industry; some may also associate them with musicians such as the conductor Zubin Mehta, or the late singer Freddie Mercury. In recent years we have, however, come to know a rather different Parsi world through the writing of Rohinton Mistry, a young Parsi settled in Canada since 1975 who has never relinquished the vivid memories of his Bombay childhood. *Tales from Firozshah Baag* (1987), is a delightful collection of eleven short stories about a group of far from rich, middle-class families living in a communal apartment block, modest bank-clerks, book-keepers, doctors, struggling to maintain a reasonable standard of living and good education for their children in an environment of poor housing, leaky plumbing, rats and cockroaches. In spite of the inevitable petty feuds, it is a close-knit society, united in the ancient rites of their Zoroastrian faith. If distance makes the heart grow fonder, distance may also sharpen the perception, as Salman Rushdie, remembering his childhood Bombay, says:

The writer who is out-of-the-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past... This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal.⁸

Writing with nostalgia from the vastly different world of Canada, Mistry experiences his past lovingly, recreating the humour and the characteristic speech of this English-speaking community whose Gujarati background has given a special flavour to the language, a flavour reminiscent also of Yiddish-English writers. These first stories augured a considerable literary talent and reading them one wondered whether Mistry would sustain this promise and continue with his Indian reminiscences or whether he would be swallowed up in the overpowering uniformity of the New World.

It was not long before we knew the answer, for in 1991, Mistry published his first full length novel *Such a Long Journey*,⁹ once again set in a Parsi apartment block in Bombay but this time concentrating more specifically on the fortunes of one modest bank-clerk, Gustad Nobel, struggling to bring up his family on a meagre salary and the daily stresses and strains of Indian city life. Nowhere has that particular level of Bombay been better described. The frustrations of power cuts, water quotas, bad sewage and filthy streets with which even the educated middle-classes must contend as they scramble to work on crowded buses, snatch a hasty lunch out of the tiffin boxes so arduously transported by the *dubbawallas* and yet maintain a quality of human relations not found in more favoured climes.

“Given the nepotic scheme of things everywhere”, as Mistry says, Gustad Noble has served his bank for 24 years without ever achieving a managerial chair, but even at his modest level, he will be touched by the big political events of his time. The black-out papers put up to cover his windows during the Sino-Indian war of 1962, remain in place for the Pakistan-Kashmir clashes of 1965 and are still in place at the time of the E. Bengal disasters of 1971, dark reminders of the aftermath of Partition still lived by the new generation of the post Independence. Even the corruption at the highest level of New Delhi politics filters down to these simple lives in Bombay as Gustad becomes the innocent victim of an intricate financial collusion. With this character Mistry achieved what has always been considered a difficult task in fiction: to make a thoroughly good man interesting. Gustad Noble lives up to his name, making his way through the trials and tests of his ‘third world’ with admirable loyalty, dignity and no little humour. Like V.S. Naipaul, Mistry has an extraordinary eye for detail but the detail is always perceived with compassion rather than irony.

In one of the last stories of *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, the young narrator, closely identified with the author, has gone to Canada and has published his book of stories which are read with pride by his parents in Bombay, but his mother expresses some disappointment that he should only concentrate on his Indian past instead of describing his Canadian present, while his father is a little uneasy about the image that outsiders might get about the Parsi community.

In the stories...all the Parsi families were poor or middle-class...but there should have been something positive about Parsis, there was so much to be proud of... the great Tatas with their contribution to the steel industry. Dadabhai Naoroji, the first to use the word *swaraj* and the first to be elected to the British Parliament...and also something about how Parsis came to India from Persia because of Islamic persecution in the 7th. century and were descents of Cyrus the Great.¹⁰

Almost as if to fill in these omissions, one year later, in 1988, Boman Desai, a Parsi resident in Chicago, published his first novel, *The Memory of Elephants*,¹¹ in

which he also looked back on his Bombay childhood, but whereas Mistry maintained his story within a straight narrative technique, Desai set out with a more complex framework in order to include elements from ancient Persian history and different phases of his own family life. His protagonist, Homi Servai, a young Indian scientist working in the USA, has perfected a “memoscan”, a machine that will enable him to replay incidents of his own life but which unexpectedly widens its range to cover what he calls *The Memory of the Soul*. The brain, he says, is like an iceberg, the top holding the living memory, the submerged part the memory of the soul of his people. By means of this rather improbable device, Homi calls up visions of his remote ancestors in Parsa, embattled and expelled by the Arab invaders, sailing to the island of Hormuz and thence to Sanjan on the West coast of India, where they settle and prosper among the Gujarati before making their way to Bombay. Through his “memoscan” he then picks up the voice of his dead *Bapajai*, the formidable Gujarati-speaking paternal grandmother who maintains a traditional life-style in a small Maratha town, contrasting strongly with the sophisticated, rich, English-speaking maternal Granny in Bombay: the one riding around in an old two-seater rickshaw, the other in a huge, cream Studebaker. This is the ancient Zoroastrian world of Persia, linked through the Gujarati to the modern, anglicized one of Jalbai Phirozsha Cama, “the first major industrialist of India”, whose descendants will, in turn attend British universities, holiday in expensive hotels and dwell in mansions on Malabar Hill. It is a world nearer to Rushdie’s remembered Bombay than that of Mistry’s, but brilliantly evoked in its own way, revealing yet another facet of that vital and varied city. It remains to be seen what these two promising young Parsi writers, exact contemporaries in their Bombay childhood and both now swept into North America, will do in the future. Will they be able to keep their hold on the India they have so skilfully evoked, or will they now attempt the delineation of the world into which they have gone?

The other minority group to which we have referred, like the Parsis, has long roots in India but is also now widely spread throughout the world. These are the Anglo-Indians, descendants of those mixed Indian and European alliances, frequent and socially accepted in the days of the East Indian Company and progressively rejected during the Raj, where as “Eurasians” they come to occupy a kind of limbo between two worlds, not entirely acceptable to either. The Anglo-Indians have played an important role in many fields, but in literature they have too often been relegated to small secondary planes as chauffeurs, nursemaids or railway officials.¹² It was, therefore, of particular interest to discover a new and extraordinarily gifted writer, I. Allan Sealy, who, with his first novel *The Trotter-Nama* (1988),¹³ would draw attention to the origins and history of one sector of these people. Having toiled for seven years with this extensive 600 page text, Sealy, as he tells us, had to wait two years to get it accepted by a publisher and a further two years before it was published.¹⁴ It finally reached the recognition it deserved on being awarded the Commonwealth Best First Book Award (Eurasia) in 1989.

Sealy, educated at the famous La Martinière school in Lucknow, was evidently inspired by the creator of that vast, fantastic edifice, the French Major General Claud Martin, an 18th. soldier in the services of Count Lally, who became attached to the court of the Nawab of Oudh as surveyor and commander of artillery and amassed a fortune which permitted him to build his fantastic palace of Constantia, marry four wives and engage in various experimental activities such as ballooning. To avoid his splendid estate being taken over by the Nawab, Martin had himself buried there, thus

converting the building into a tomb. It is out of this picturesque figure –Justin Aloyius Trotter in Sealy’s version– and the city of Lucknow (Naklau), that the novelist has spun a wondrous tale of seven generations of Trotters, ranging over two centuries of Anglo-Indian history –Trotters in indigo, Trotters in the army, Trotters on the railways, an exuberant pot-pourri of fact and fantasy narrated in the old Mughal story–telling manner –the nama– with its multiple interspersions and digressions, but also reminiscent at times of the opulent, ingenuous discursiveness of 17th. century English writers such as Robert Burton or Sir Thomas Browne or even the bizarre modern creations of Mervyn Peake. With his ebullient sense of humour and masterly command of language, Sealy had brought off a genuine tour de force. Given his habit of extensive travelling and the fact that he had previously written a Ph.D. on Wilson Harris, one wondered again whether he would remain in the ranks of Indian novelists writing about India.

As in the case of Mistry, the reader was not long kept in the dark, for his next novel *Hero* (1991) found him still in India, but a very different India described in totally different terms, confirming the great versatility of the writer. Far from the flamboyant prose of *The Trotter-Nama*, Sealy employs here a film technique as the narrator, Zero, scripts the story of Hero, a poor, South Indian boy who rises to become the cinema idol and thence sinks to his perdition as a politician. Western readers are familiar with the progress of Hollywood stars to the higher political spheres but, as Sealy observes, it is in India that this curious metamorphosis is most marked:

We have more film-stars turned politicians than any country on the earth... There are today at least four former actors in Parliament at any given time and the number of chief ministers and lesser legislators with film backgrounds remains cheerfully constant.¹⁵

For a film star to turn politician strikes Sealy as a strange retrograde move, as if a butterfly should turn into a caterpillar, and on the basis of this idea, he turns a sharp, satirical eye on the glitter of the Bombay film industry with its *chamchas* or sycophants pullulating around the stars, a world that is, perhaps, darkly mirrored on the political scene. Sealy’s riotous humour has become more sombre and subdued and one waits expectantly to see where he will go next.

One of the things that set Indian writers apart from all others is their profound affinity to the ancient sagas –the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*– epics which are indeed still familiar to Indians of all walks of life in a way that our Western world no longer retains regarding its cultural background in the Bible or Greek mythology. It is rare to find a modern Hindu writer who will not, in overt or veiled form, revert to these ancestral stories. P. Lal, in the introduction to his adaptation of *The Mahabharata* writes:

To be Indian, or simply to live in India at any period in her recorded history, is to open oneself to the benign influence of two epics –the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*... While Valmiki delineates the Hindu, the dream of perfection; Vyasa’s epic is a mirror in which the Indian sees himself undeceived.

Lal goes on to cite many examples of modern references to these two texts in the press and political speeches, illustrating how close to daily life they still remain.

The epic of Vyasa is not a literary masterpiece out there, somewhere in the past, or tucked away in air-conditioned museums and libraries. Its characters still walk the Indian streets, its animals populate our forests, its legends are the disturbing warp and woof of our age.¹⁶

Presumably it was the reading of Lal's text that led Shashi Tharoor to write his *Great Indian Novel* (1989).¹⁷ Tharoor, like the other novelists we have described, has for a long time been distanced from the country of his birth, in his case working with the U.N. Commission for Refugees since 1978. This absence has not, however, meant a withdrawal from the political fortunes of his country. *The Great Indian Novel* is his modern version of the *Mahabharata* told with humour, irony and a certain dosage of acerbity. Ved Vyasa, the narrator, is now born with the 20th. century and the tale he has to tell to his immortal scribe Ganapati, is that of the last days of the Raj, Independence and the aftermath leading up to the time of the Emergency. Weaving, as Lal says, "the disturbing warp and woof of our age", the familiar figures emerge in their modern guises: Dhritarashtra-Nehru with his "blind man's gift of seeing the world not as it was but as he wanted it to be", his wife Gandhari the Grim and his severe daughter Priya Duryodhana-Indira, the pale Pandu-Subhas Chandra Bose and the impeccable Karna-Jinnah, together with many others of those well-known characters, play out once again the struggles of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, ancient stories, sempiternal and self-renewing in the history of mankind. It might have been a sombre story but Tharoor interweaves a deal of sly humour, playing with the reader in his witty chapter headings. "The Duel with the Crown", "The Powers of Silence", "The Sun also Rises", "Darkness at Dawn", "Passages through India", etc. and the waggish introduction of fiction characters from Forster, Scott or Kipling. It is finally a tragic-comedy in which the ideals of Gandhi's *svaraj* and the early days of the Congress Party degenerate into a melancholy distortion of the dream. Tharoor writes:

India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay. Overdeveloped in social structures, bureaucracy, political process, finance and the university network¹⁸.

That could, of course, also be a description of the United Nations Organization in which he is employed!

Born in 1956, the same year as Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh is yet another of the promising writers to appear in the second half of the eighties. His first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986)¹⁹ quickly caught the attention of the critics, some of whom wished to see in him a new Salman Rushdie. It has also been the fate of these followers of The First Midnight Child always to be compared to him, but Amitav Ghosh, although a declared admirer of Rushdie, is undoubtedly a very different kind of writer. His Bengali origins, Indian education, (as opposed to Rushdie's British one), his training as a social anthropologist, his study of Arabic and the Muslim world of the Middle East, have all played a part in the creation of this lively, fantastic and comical "circle" which is, nevertheless, sustained by a serious concern for certain important issues of our time: the confrontation of Tradition versus Progress, the role of science and technology in the Third World, the plight of migrants, whether refugees swept from their homes by political upheavals or those lured to a better material life, "wherever money and its attendant arms have chosen to descend on people unprepared for its onslaughts".²⁰

Ghosh is a natural story-teller and carries his reader along in a fast moving narration from Calcutta, the cultured city, one time home of eminent scientists such as Jagadis Chandra Bose, Satyendra Nath Bose or the Nobel prize-winning C.V. Raman, to Lalpukar, a small village on the frontier of Bangladesh “a dumping ground for the refuse from tyrants’ frenzies”.²¹ From there we travel south to Mahé on the Malabar coast, the port from where “an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capitalism”, set out in the hopes of making a fortune in the oil-rich kingdoms of the Middle East.

Ghosh is also a creator of memorable and unusual characters such as the Dhaka born Balaram, drawn to Presidency College in Calcutta by the fame of its eminent scientists, and there swept away almost to dementia by his passionate readings of Pasteur. Like some latter day Don Quixote, battling with the enemies of truth and justice, he wages war on superstition and germs, a struggle that will lead to the burning of his books and general disaster for all about him. There is the bemused, potato-headed Alu, the weaver, wrongly accused of terrorism, whose flight from the police will lead him from Bengal to Malabar and thence across to the Middle East. There is the mountainous Egyptian woman, Zindi-at-Tiffaha, in whose house a motley selection of migrant workers find lodging in al-Ghazira. It is a world little known up to now in English literature, the world of those thousands of anonymous people at the mercy of “the whims of capitalism”, one of whose latest manifestations has been the Gulf War.

Alu, with his passionate devotion to weaving, inspires one of the dominant metaphors of the novel, for it is, according to Ghosh, the loom and weaving which symbolize the human lot. It is a universal activity whose “essence of cloth-locking yarns together by crossing them –has not changed since prehistory.” It is the loom that “has tied together the world together with its bloody ironies from the beginning of human time.”²² In a fascinating incursion into the intricacies of weaving and the complexity of the many pieces of the loom on whose beam the name changes every inch, Ghosh sees an image of human history, the constant criss-crossing of language and culture, the constant conflict of trade and territory.

In the same way that I. Allan Sealy’s second novel made a big break in the theme and form, Ghosh’s second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988)²³ marks a notable departure from the narrative technique and social background of *The Circle of Reason*. The only thing which links the two works is the author’s continued concept of the intertwining of personal and national relations inextricably woven together by subtle emotional ties even as political situations strive to separate the strands with artificially created frontiers, the shadow lines of his title. The metaphor of weaving, so strikingly introduced in *The Circle*, is no longer overt though one notes that the narrator is engaged in a Ph.D. on the textile trade between England and India in the 19th. century. Resorting now to a more fragmented, post-modern style, this narrator, born in 1952, weaves a story moving back and forth in time, linking memories recalled by his East Bengali grandmother, a cousin’s recollections of wartime London and his own childhood and youth in Calcutta. The social background of diplomats, business men and teachers also differs from the earlier work and is closer to the author’s own, but ultimately the message seems to be the same: a world plagued with ethnic, religious, nationalistic or social frontiers brings death to the altruistic or humane qualities in man.

An old friendship built up during the Raj between a Bengali judge and an Englishman, linking two families in two widely separated countries will end in separation and death. A grandmother born in Dhaka, when it was still part of India, will find on

her return in old age that she is now regarded as a foreigner in her own land, and yet, she asks, where are the frontiers? The imaginary lines on a map are nowhere visible in the physical contours seen from a plane, nor in the visages of the people in Bangladesh. An old Dhaka lawyer who has refused to move at Partition, sums up the tragedy of transmigration: "Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then?"²⁴

The lines are not only geographical. There are lines which divide families through local feuds such as that which leads the litigious Boses in Dhaka to partition the ancestral home. There are the lines which separate the haves from the have-nots in India's notoriously disparate wealth. As a child, the narrator, belonging to a relatively well-to-do family, is made aware of the abyss which separates him from the majority of his fellow citizens, and how easily he might fall back into the netherworld.

I was well schooled in looking away, the jungle-craft of gentility...the landscape that lent a note of hysteria to my mother's voice when she drilled me for my examinations; it was to these slopes she pointed when she told me that if I didn't study hard I would end up over there...a couple of failed examinations to put me where our relative was, in permanent proximity to that blackness; that landscape was the quicksand that seethed beneath the polished floors of our house.²⁵

How can one live in this harsh world of shadow lines, of brutal divisions and excluding frontiers? Survival may depend on the power of the imagination as a protective force. We all, in the end, says Ghosh, live in invented countries. Thus Tribdib, the narrator's cousin will take refuge in nostalgic memories of a boyhood stay in England, while Ila, the child of diplomats, living a rootless life and belonging nowhere, creates a fantasy world as she would wish it to have been. After the vitality of *The Circle of Reason* this is a more sombre book imbued with a sense of melancholy at the way things are in this age of violence and fanaticism.

With his great sense of the interlocking forces of history, one wondered if in the end Ghosh would continue his writing career as a novelist or, perhaps, turn to historical research or reporting on current events in the Third World. With his third book *In an Antique Land* (1992)²⁶ he has indeed departed from the realm of fiction to offer a fascinating account of a period spent, as a research student, in a small village south-east of Alexandria in 1980, woven together, in his characteristic manner, with his explorations into the medieval trade relations between South India and the Middle East and the reconstruction of the life of an anonymous 12th. century Indian slave in the service of a Jewish trader, briefly mentioned in one letter. "The reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential", the slave mentioned in the letter was "a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved".²⁷ Whether Ghosh will in the future write fiction or social history, and whether he will continue writing about his homeland of India or spread his net even wider than he has already done, is something that remains to be seen. What is evident is that there will always be a concern for those 'ordinary' and inconsequential people who make up 99% of history.

Commenting on the second novel of a newly emerged Bengali writer, Amit Chaudhuri, one critic expressed concern about the brevity of the writing. After a first novel which abandons its family chronicle after 130 pages, in this new one, of 133 pages, the critic comments: "He has proved himself a consummate miniaturist, but even on this scale his books have a habit of running out of a steam".²⁸ Such certainly could not be said about Vikram Seth, the author of a lengthy novel in verse, followed by the massive 1347 page Indian family chronicle *A Suitable Boy* (1993),²⁹ which caused some stir in the publishing world and merited an astonishing million dollar advance on USA, British and Indian rights, something quite unknown in the annals of Indian writing in England. Reactions to this lengthy tome have varied from expansive praise for the revival of the 19th. century tradition of Tolstoy or George Eliot, to certain cool references to the banal, prosaic or even 'soap-opera' quality of the work. Seth himself seems to have foreseen both these responses and has humorously prefaced his novel with two quotes from Voltaire: "The superfluous, that very necessary thing" and "The secret of being a bore is to say everything". A fair reading of the book obliges one to say that the telling of this detailed account of the daily life of four average, middle class families in the India of the early 1950s will scarcely prove boring to foreign readers for whom there is little opportunity to experience this particular world.

Vikram Seth, of Marwari origin and born in 1952, is, like all the previous writers mentioned, deeply rooted in India, yet widely travelled and consequently able to see his homeland with a certain humorous tolerance. Perhaps it is this very equanimous tone which has disturbed those critics who expect a more acrimonious attitude to Indian ills.

Despite its extraordinary length, the time span covered by Seth's novel is a mere year and a half in the lives of his numerous characters, the time necessary for Mrs Rupa Mehra to marry off one daughter and find a 'suitable boy' for the second, Lata. In the intervening pages, following through the typical ramifications of Indian families, we make contact with a number of different Indian worlds: the traditional life in the ancient home town of the Kapoors and the Mehras, reposing on the banks of the Ganges in Uttar Pradesh, is contrasted with that of the wealthy, sophisticated Chatterjis in Calcutta, while periodic digressions into Kanpur, Lucknow or Delhi reveal further aspects as also does the rural, feudal world of *zaminders* and *chamars* in the villages.

Seth is an exuberant writer, obviously interested in many diverse aspects of Indian life ranging from the complexities of Indian classical music and Urdu poetry to the more mundane details of the leather industry and the making of a pair of hand-made shoes. He feels equally at home in the circuitous world of regional politics, the devious animosities of academia and the homely chitchat of domesticity. Of the six writers here considered he is the one who enters most into the world of women: the emancipated Chatterji girls, the relatively free university students such as Lata and Malati, and those still confined in the strictest purdah, contrasted with the determined Begum Abida Khan who has broken out of the Muslim straightjacket to enter a belligerent arena of local politics.

This world of the 1950s, following closely on Independence and Partition is interesting in what it tells us of Hindu-Muslim relations in the new India. The Hindu minister Mahesh Kapoor, though set on land reforms and destroying the power of the rich *zaminders*, maintains his old friendship with the land-owning Muslim Nawab of Baitar as do the young sons of the two families; the Hindu Lata Mehra's friendship

with a Muslim fellow-student is regarded with horror by her traditional mother who hastens to find a suitable boy of the right caste and religion.

For these writers, born in the aftermath of Midnight, the British presence in India is no more than hearsay. Apart from the English language and certain architectural features, what remains of that Occupation to engage the attention of this new generation? Seth depicts with some irony the 'covenanted' Arun Mehra, so snobbishly attached to the firm of Bentsen Pryce, one of the many British companies still managing the bulk of India's foreign trade. Arun is indeed a left-over of those Brown Sahibs so carefully cultivated and controlled by the Raj but perhaps he also points towards that neo-colonialism which other percipient writers, such as Kamala Markandaya or Nayantara Sahgal discern in post-Independence India.³⁰ It is to be noted that the 'suitable boy' who finally gains the prize and marries Lata Mehra at the end of this lengthy story, is a self-made man, who has not trodden the ancient halls of learning in Oxford or Cambridge but rather the lower echelons of a Midland technological college, after which he has imposed his superior skill and managerial prowess on the equally exclusive Czechs of the Praha shoe company.

At the outset of this brief survey of recent Indian writing, we raised certain questions. To what extent could the Indian novel in English survive in a post-Independence world? To what extent could it be representative of more than the tiny 3% of English speakers, mostly deriving from a foreign educated, middle-class élite who would, in any case, be writing with a foreign readership in view? It is true that the six writers here considered do correspond to this description. Their books have all been published by foreign presses and have reached a public beyond India. Although, as we have seen, they cover a wide range of themes, diverse regional and ethnic groups, one does end with the impression that there is much of India not represented in their work. The less savoury aspects of the world of women still held in considerable bondage, details of which are so frequently described in the Indian press, the harsh circumstances of much rural life and the extreme urban poverty, the quicksand seething beneath the polished floors of Amitav Ghosh's house, the full complexities of religion and the caste system so inextricably intertwined in all Indian life, these are touched on lightly in these works but seem to be much more closely experienced in writing in the old indigenous languages of the country. This is a rich literature which, unfortunately, we can only sample in the relatively few translations at our disposal. While we eagerly await new writing from such promising latter day Children of Midnight, we also must hope that more of this 'other India' will be made available to enrich our horizons.³¹

Notes

1. See (1941) *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*, made by T.S. Eliot with an essay on Kipling. Faber & Faber.
2. See R.K. Naryan, (1975) *My Days*. Chatto & Windus.
3. Mulk Raj Anand, (1981) *Conversations in Bloomsbury*. Wilwood House, and "The Making of an Indian English Novel". (1993) *The Eye of the Beholder*. Maggie Butcher Ed. London: Commonwealth Institute.
4. A brief discussion about the history of Indian English Literature and its prospects can be found in G.N. Devi, "A Note Towards the History of Indian English Literature", (1989) *A*

- Shaping of Connections*. Mandelstrup (Denmark): Dangaroo Press, and G.N. Devi, "The Multi-Cultural Context of Indian Literature in English", (1990) *Crisis & Creativity*. G. Davis & H. Maes-Jelinek Eds. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
5. M.R. Anand, *The Eye of the Beholder*.
 6. Raja Rao, (1938) *Kanthapura*. New York: New Directions. vii
 7. Among the many writers one could cite here would be Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Chaman Nahal or Kushwant Singh.
 8. Salman Rushdie, (1983) "The Indian Writer in England", *The Eye of the Beholder*. M. Butcher Ed. London: Commonwealth Institute.
 9. Rohinton Mistry, (1991) *Such a Long Journey*. Toronto: McClelland & Steward.
 10. Rohinton Mistry, (1987) *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Penguin Canada.
 11. Boman Desai, (1988) *The Memory of Elephants*. André Deutsch.
 12. Gloria Jean Moore in (1986) *The Anglo-Indian Vision*. Melbourne: AE Press, registers various complaints about the poor image given to Anglo-Indians in British literature.
 13. I. Allan Sealy, (1990) *The Trotter-Nama*. (1988) Penguin.
 14. In his second novel *Hero*, the first chapter entitled "Entrance" gives an account of the writing and publishing of *The Trotter-Nama*.
 15. I. Allan Sealy, (1991) *Hero*. Secker & Warburg.
 16. P. Lal, (1980) *The Mahabharata of Vyasa. Condensed from Sanskrit and Transcreated into English*. Sahibabad: Vikas Publishing. Ghazizbad. U. P.
 17. Shashi Tharoor, (1990) *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Penguin.
 18. *op. cit.* p. 17
 19. Amitav Ghosh, (1990) *The Circle of Reason* (1986). Penguin.
 20. *op. cit.* p. 189
 21. *op. cit.* p. 59
 22. *op.cit.* p. 55
 23. Amitav Ghosh, (1988) *The Shadow Lines*. London: Bloomsbury. 24.*op. cit.* p. 211
 25. *op. cit.* p. 132
 26. Amitav Ghosh, (1992) *In an Antique Land*. Granta Books.
 27. *op. cit.* Prologue.
 28. Jonathan Coe, (1993) "Doing Justice to the Mess", a review of Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag*. *London Review of Books*, 19, August.
 29. Vikram Seth, (1993) *A Suitable Boy*. London: Phoenix House. 30. I think here of novels such as: Kamala Markandaya, (1982) *The Coffer Dams*. New York: John Day & Co., and (1982) *Pleasure City*. London: Chatto & Windus, and Nayantara Sahgal, (1987) *Rich Like Us*. London: Sceptre.
 31. The world of women, translated from Indian languages, is emerging particularly in short stories such as those found in (1990) *The Inner Court. Stories by Indian Women*. Lakshmi Holmström Ed. London: Virago.
- The great Premchand, author of 14 novels and more than 300 stories in Urdu and Hindi, though belonging still to the time of the Raj, brilliantly reflected aspects of North Indian rural life. Some of his stories, originally translated by David Rabin in 1969, appeared in a revised edition in Penguin, 1988. Gopinath Mohanty, who has written 25 novels in his native Oriya, has seen his *Paraja* translated by Bikram K. Das in Oxford University Press. 1987. Anantamurti's *Samskara*, so critically discussed in V.S. Naipaul's *India: a Wounded Civilisation*, is another example of the revelation of Indian life (in this case the exclusiveness of the Brahmin caste) which reaches us through translation. In this case it is worth noting that a new light is shed on the caste system in Kasthuri Sreenivasan's (1990) *The Light of Heaven*. Penguin, where we see how a brilliant but unemployed Brahmin youth decides to become an Untouchable in the new world of better opportunities for the lowly. Sreenivasan, who has written novels in both his native Tamil and in English, is an interesting example of the bilingual potentials of India.